

The wisdom of our elders

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

My fascination with local history began in the mid-1980s due to an overwhelming curiosity about our community's namesake, Billy Lee, for whom the creek was first named after. I quickly realized how fortunate we are in that the history of settlement is so accessible because it is so recent, especially when compared to most other regions in North America. My research in those years included interviewing a number of sons and daughters of the original North Shuswap pioneers and my appreciation of their stories became strengthened in part because of the parallels between their lives and my own.

Knowing that most of the children of our community's pioneers have long since passed away, I was surprised to receive a very thoughtful letter in March of this year from Phyllis Parkes, who was one of the first babies born in the then new Royal Inland Hospital in 1912! Phyllis wrote the letter to add her disapproval of the decision to allow houseboats to continue dumping greywater sewage into Shuswap Lake, as this was where she grew up as the daughter of South Shuswap homesteaders, Walter and Kate Dunne.

Born in Fort Morley, Alberta in 1883, Walter Dunne first arrived in 1903 to homestead near Sorrento, after returning from the Boer War. In 1906, he married Kate, the daughter of another nearby homesteader, Frank Barnard. In addition to planting the first apple orchard in the area, Walter built log houses, cleared land for his neighbours, operated a sawmill, ploughed the roads in winter, and cut timbers used for construction projects such as the Red Bridge in Kamloops.

This summer I had the opportunity to meet and interview Phyllis, who still spends summers in one of the cabins her father built on the homestead. Although frail, her mind is still sharp and she cares deeply about the need to protect the quality of our water. She still remembers her childhood years: walking to the Blind Bay School, sometimes through four feet of snow; stacking lumber and firewood for her father; travelling on sleighs across the ice on the lake in the winter; picking cherries and currants; and helping with many of the farming chores.

While the winters were indeed colder then than now, the summers were just as hot. Fires were also quite prevalent and often caused by the homesteaders themselves from land clearing fires that went out of control. Phyllis fondly remembers the rich social life that her family enjoyed with the other community members, including the big picnics at Reedman Point, where people arrived in boats from all over the North and South Shuswap. Sometimes, famed Reverend Grice-Hutchinson would show up with his portable organ to provide a church service at these picnics.

The Reverend was a key person in her life, as she was the first baby he christened in Saint Mary's Church in Sorrento. And in 1939, the Reverend married Phyllis and her husband Vincent Parkes in England, where they moved as he had inherited the Moor

Abbey Estate in Herefordshire. This large farm and mansion was open to evacuees from the cities and many Canadians including soldiers on leave and nurses.

There was still a sparkle in her eye when Phyllis recalled the well-attended Christmas parties hosted by Sorrento “founder” James Kinghorn at their estate home, Spes Bona. Although Kinghorn was often characterized as being aristocratic, Phyllis found him friendly and remembers how at a New Year’s Eve dance, he took her hand and they led the march around the old Sorrento community hall’s dance floor.

In those early days, the homesteaders found many remnants of the Secwepemc people, including the remains of their pit houses or kekulis along the lakeshore and many arrowheads and scrapers as they cleared the land. During the summer, some Secwepemc people came to camp on the nearby Barnard property, when they picked berries in the hills. Phyllis used to watch Susan Arnouse make baskets from cedar roots and birch bark. She also remembers turning off their lights at night so they could watch the native people spearing fish from their canoes using torches to attract the fish.

Phyllis cares deeply about the lake and is concerned about the declining quality of our water. As a naturalist and a long time member of the Woman’s Institute she has helped bring clean water to people in third world countries and is aghast because our water here is deteriorating. Having now endured a heart attack and a stroke, Phyllis carries on with the “hope that others will continue to fight for clean water.”

As time moves forward, it becomes ever more important to record and maintain the history of our communities while the details are still attainable. The South Shuswap is one of the few communities in our region without a written history. Fortunately, one long term summer resident who cares deeply about the Shuswap, Ann Chidwick, is now working on just such a history, having spent many a summer in the old Dunne lakeside home owned by her father, the late Dr. Willoughby.

As time moves forward, it becomes ever more important to record and maintain the history of our communities while the details are still attainable. The South Shuswap is one of the few communities in our region without a written history. Fortunately, one long term summer resident who cares deeply about the Shuswap, Ann Chidwick, is now working on just such a history, having spent many a summer in the old Dunne lakeside home owned by her father, the late Dr. Willoughby.